

Western Prairie

Socio-Economic and Cultural Context

This summary of the socio-economic and cultural context of the Western Prairie chapter of the Ecological Landscapes of Wisconsin book (WDNR 2015).

The socio-economic and cultural contexts of a region must be considered in any planning process. While this plan will focus on resource and recreation management of the properties, these underlying contexts are important in understanding the needs of the public when planning the properties of the Western Prairie Ecological Landscape (WP EL). The demographic and economic data reported here are for the two counties that make up the majority of the WP: Pierce and St. Croix

Socio-economic Characteristics

Land Use and Ownership

In the WP EL, only 36,00 acres, or 5.3% of all land and water is publicly owned (WDNR 2005a). This is significantly less than the statewide average of 19.5% and ranks this landscape 13th of 16 with the percentage of public land ownership. This ecological landscape has the second highest percentage of land in agriculture with 71% in Pierce County and 66% for St. Croix County.

Population, Housing and Income

The two counties that make up the majority of the WP EL are traditionally rural and agricultural but are rapidly coming under the influence of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The population density of the WP counties is reflective of the region's rapid growth with 97 persons per square mile (105 persons per square mile is the statewide average). Rapid population growth in the Western Prairie counties is reflective of the commuters who work in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and live in this area.

Combined housing density in the WP counties is 38.7 housing units per square mile of land which is less than the state average of 48.5 units per square mile. Similar to population, the housing density is higher in St. Croix county due to the ease of the commute from the twin cities. Seasonal and recreational homes make up only combined average per county of 1.5% which is considerably lower than the statewide average of 6.3% per county.

Per capita income is generally higher than the statewide average which likely indicates that many Western Prairies households have two wage earners. Unemployment rates are close to the statewide average of 3-4%.

Economic Sectors

Economic sectors accounting for the highest percentage of jobs in the WP are government, tourism-related, manufacturing (non-wood), retail trade and health care/social services. Other important sectors are agriculture, fishing, hunting and construction.



Cultural Context

The history of human resource use and settlement in the WP is fragmentary and often poorly understood. There are many gaps of understanding of the cultural evolution of the early peoples in the Western Prairie. It is likely that during the Euro-American settlement, the Santee Dakota people inhabited this part of the state. In the 18th century, the Chippewa people had also moved into this area which led to tensions, and feuding between the two tribes.

Dutch and Polish immigrants jumpstarted the expansion of agriculture in the area with only four farms in 1850 that multiplied to 5,295 by 1890. Farming in Western Prairie counties reached its maximum in 1900 with 6,466 farms. Over the early part of the 20th century, the type of farming in Western Prairie underwent some fundamental changes with the increased emphasis on dairy farming. Farm numbers in the WP decreased 11% between 1970 and 2002 with 3,810 farms in 1970 and 3,374 in 2002. This ecological landscape has the second highest percentage of land in agricultural.

Currently the WP counties are primarily rural and agricultural but are rapidly coming under the influence of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Population and housing density remain below state averages but are rapidly increasing, especially in St. Croix County.





Western Prairie Ecological Landscape Planning